



# "Eden Rais'd in the Waste Wilderness": Milton and the Obedient Moment

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University of Oregon, May 1992



It has become popular in academic circles to read for subtexts, and even for antitexts and untexts, in works that seek to bring a spark of divinity to humankind. Because we assume that there is no spark and no divinity, no "outside" beyond our own circle of discourse, our cynicism demands that we rethink literature and read for significances, especially currently popular political ones, which we add to it, rather than for whatever didactic project it may seek to embody. We are talking more now and listening less. I have no proof that this trend is a bad thing-- certainly it has been good for a number of careers--but I fear that we may be developing a "hearing disability." It may be useful to at least occasionally try to read un-cynically, with a willingness to be taught, to be led, even carried away, if only for a time. One way to read Milton, for example, is to set aside our own prejudices just long enough to glimpse the paradigms that made his world comprehensible to his contemporaries, as even the Marxist critic Christopher Hill has observed:

We do not now look to the book of Revelation for our analysis of political processes; but the concept of the slaughter of the Two Witnesses helped Francis Woodcock to explain what was happening, and to forecast what was likely to happen. Similarly we may find it difficult to take seriously the idea that fear of popery was a significant reason for supporting Parliament in 1642; but it was for Richard Baxter, no fool. When Lady Eleanor Davies in 1633 foretold a violent death for Charles I, Archbishop Laud dismissed her as 'never so mad a lady'. But after 1649 it was less easy to laugh her off. Laud had already met his violent death by then (*The Experience of Defeat* 27).

The prophetic paradigm is a major constituent of poetry in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: Spenser, Donne, Herbert, and Milton are striking examples, and Spenser's use of the prophetic moment has been thoroughly explored by Angus Fletcher. We have almost

forgotten, says Fletcher, that a prophet, particularly in the Hebraic/Christian tradition, is not primarily someone who predicts the future or sees what is happening elsewhere, like a crystal-gazing "seer" or riddling oracle, but one whose word is of divine rather than human origin and therefore to be obeyed (3-4). The commentator in the Jerusalem Bible who introduces the prophets, beginning with Isaiah, puts it concisely: "the prophet in Israel is a mouthpiece; he has no doubt that 'the word of God' has come to him and that he must pass it on to others" (969). Isaiah exemplifies the mouthpiece prophet: "Listen, you heavens; earth, attend, for Yahweh is speaking....Hear the word of Yahweh, you rulers of Sodom...." "What are your empty sacrifices to me?" says Yahweh" (Is. 1:2a,10a, 11a JB). The discourse of the deity interrupts the discourse of the known world as a word from beyond the hermeneutical circle. A prophet's word, then, privileged as divine word, comes from beyond the temporal and is not subject to temporality. The prophet, in the moment of speaking the divine word, performs or is performed by the transcendent-- becomes a threshold of immutable holiness in our world of profane mutability. Deterioration of the divine vision when retold within the destructive confines of temporally bound discourse is a cost accepted by the prophet, whose mission is never to present the divine in its entirety and perfection (an acknowledged impossibility), but to represent it as well as can be done, by telling a story/myth/allegory/ parable. Metaphorical language, dance, image--that which stands for something else-- is employed to the best of the prophet's ability to reach, not everyone, certainly not the cynical, but all who desire to be reached and to find some direction for their lives. The project is didactical and unashamedly so. "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear."

Milton's last three great works comprise a coherent three-point didactic program, grounded in three parables. Each parable describes one or more divine interventions, and singles out an important component of the prophetic moment as its subject. That subject I shall call the *obedient moment*. He begins with [Paradise Lost](#) as the history of an alienation of worldly discourse from God that will require intervention, by means of the prophetic moment, if it is to be made a "fortunate fall." Next, he examines a crucial phase of that intervention, the moment of obedience, of Jesus' refusal of self-will, in [Paradise Regained](#). Finally, in [Samson Agonistes](#), he brings forward the idea that Jesus' moment of obedience cannot be regarded as a uniquely intercessory incident, but one which can be imitated in even desperately adverse circumstances. The key to Milton's project is his expectation that the reader, taught by his divinely inspired parables, will be able to repudiate the outward Paradise for which the Puritans so long and mistakenly sought, and begin to build the inward New Jerusalem to which the Spirit of God calls them. *He means to make prophets of us all*. This is not the project of a defeated man. Indeed, Milton is not even on the defensive.

## 1. Loss of Eden ([Paradise Lost](#))

The first of Milton's three parables opens with the thesis that will concern all three:

Of Man's first disobedience, and the fruit  
 Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste  
 Brought death into the world, and all our woe,  
 With loss of Eden, till one greater Man  
 Restore us, and regain the blessed seat, (PL I:1-5)

That is, the present story will tell of Adam's disobedience. As Adam is the first man, he is all mankind at the time, hence the capitalization. He stands for a series of falls; first his own as an individual, second, that of all who come after (with the notable exception of the second Man), third, of the Puritan failure in the Revolution. Yet all this tale of disobedience aims to remind us that from disobedience and its consequences, even when things are at their bleakest, there is a way of return to Paradise: the "one greater Man" who restores us. Milton aims to "justify God's ways to men" not by providing ironclad rational arguments but by parabolically asserting Eternal Providence. This is an excellent theodical strategy, for Milton already knows that rational arguments cannot achieve his aim.

A theodical argument must attempt to reconcile three propositions: that God is all-powerful; that God is all-good; and that terrible things happen. Any two of these can be reconciled, but not all three (Frederick Buechner 24). Anti-Miltonists assume this as their starting point and hunt for the places where the poet fails to knit the three propositions together. Of course, because he does fail, they find them. And they aren't refuted by Milton's defenders. Both camps tend to make the mistake of treating Milton's poetic narratives as if they were intended as literal history or theological treatise. But Milton anticipates and derails his rationalist detractors (and defenders) by sticking to poetic narrative. This does not admit any weakness in his subject matter; only in his ability to capture it in its entirety. As Dennis Danielson points out, it would be rash to assume that Milton hopes to use poetry to hide theological inconsistencies (19). Instead, Milton is careful to have Raphael explain to Adam that what he is about to tell him is tailored to his limited capacity and hence not literally true (22).

...how shall I relate  
 To human sense the invisible exploits  
 Of warring spirits...how last unfold  
 The secrets of another world, perhaps  
 Not lawful to reveal? Yet for thy good  
 This is dispensed, and what surmounts the reach  
 Of human sense I shall delineate so,  
 By likening spiritual to corporal forms,  
 As may express them best...(V.564-574).

Milton is quite aware of the hermeneutical circle. In the *De doctrina Christiana*, he states unequivocally the metaphorical character of theological discourse:

When we talk about knowing God, it must be understood in terms of man's limited powers of comprehension. God, as he really is, is far beyond man's imagination, let alone his understanding....in the sacred writings...God is always described or outlined not as he is but in such a way as will make him conceivable to us (133).

Since our understanding is limited, we are dependent upon the scriptures, not for an accurate idea of God, but for the best idea we can get. But even this, Milton warns, is beyond us, unless we read the scriptures with the aid of divine inspiration: "No one, however, can form correct ideas about God guided by nature or reason alone, without the word or message of God..." (132). "Left onely in those written Records pure,/Though not but by the Spirit understood" (PL VII.513-14). Since Milton was aware that "reason alone" would not suffice, it follows that he as a prophet-poet, might seek to make God available through divinely inspired discourse, as did the Hebrew prophet-poets of old. He saw his vocation in just this light from an early point in his career, having turned away from the ordained priesthood in favor of poetry as the better ministry:

The hungry sheep look up, and are not fed,  
But swoln with wind and the rank mist they draw,  
Rot inwardly, and foul contagion spread;  
Besides what the grim wolf with privy paw  
Daily devours apace, and nothing said;  
But that two-handed engine at the door  
Stands ready to smite once, and smite no more. ("Lycidas" 125-131)

One of the probable interpretations of "two-handed engine" is that Sword of which Blake speaks, the word of Yahweh in the mouth of the prophet.

As Adam prepares to depart from Paradise, the archangel Michael gives him a crash course in history--*future* history--and explicit instructions on how to get there from here. The story from Genesis to the birth of Christ--almost unremitting failure--seems bleak, but at last there is a ray of hope with the advent of the second Man. Adam expects that this Son of God will conquer Satan in a physical, outward battle:

Needs must the Serpent now his capital bruise  
Expect with mortal pain: say where and when  
Their fight, what stroke shall bruise the Victor's heel"  
(XII.383-5).

Michael warns him that no such battle will take place. Instead, Satan's defeat will consist in the simple undoing of his work:

...nor so is overcome  
Satan, whose fall from Heaven, a deadlier bruise,  
Disabled not to give thee thy death's wound;  
which he who comes thy Savior shall recure,  
Not by destroying Satan, but his works  
In thee and in thy seed (390-5).

"The law of God exact," he explains, "he shall fulfill/Both by obedience and by love" (XII.402.3).

Adam is impressed. But he wonders how this one Man's obedience is an act of saving. After the Deliverer's ascent to heaven, are not his followers left unprotected?

...what will betide the few  
His faithful, left among the faithful herd,  
The enemies of truth; who then shall guide  
His people, who defend? will they not deal  
Worse with his followers than with him they dealt? (480-4)

"Be sure they will," is Michael's ominous reply. But in place of the ascended savior "He to his own a Comforter will send,/The promise of the Father, who shall dwell, /His Spirit, within them..." (485-8). This is Milton's explanation of how the works of Satan are to be destroyed in the seed of Adam. Jesus is to be in a sense a new kind of being on Earth, because he is the son of God and of a woman, or a kind of man-God. Satan will find him baffling, because although the new Man can be tempted, he cannot be made to fall. This savior would seem, then, to have an unfair advantage over the rest of us. But the promise to the followers of this new Man is that by receiving the Spirit, they too will be able to resist temptation--not by any work of their own, as they are human, but by work of the Spirit in them, by which means they become children of the Father. All this derives from St. Paul:

But when the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons. And because ye are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father. Wherefore thou art no more a servant, but a son; and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ (Gal. 4:4-7 KJV).

Although there is no space here for a full argument, a case could be made that Milton's entire project in his Latin study, *On Christian Doctrine*, as well as in the three parables,

turns upon this passage from Galatians. In the *Christian Doctrine* there is one chapter on God, one on divine decree, one on predestination, and having disposed of the Father in relatively few words, Milton moves on to forty-five chapters on the Son, whose work involves the implantation of his Spirit in man, and on how man may demonstrate that this implantation has taken place, becoming an heir of the Father through the Son.

As Michael ends his lesson, Adam shows that he has grasped its essence by aspiring to live in the manner of the Spirit-led:

Henceforth I learn that to obey is best,  
And love with fear the only God, to walk  
As in his presence, ever to observe  
His providence, and on him sole depend,  
Merciful over all his works, with good  
Still overcoming evil, and by small  
Accomplishing great things...(561-7).

To obey is not merely best, but *in imitatio Christi*, is all. The archangelic tutor approves his pupil's newfound resolve, and recapitulates the lesson with what for Milton is the climactic point of the entire parable:

This having learnt, thou hast attained the sum  
of wisdom; hope no higher, though all the stars  
Thou knew'st by name and all the ethereal powers,  
All secrets of the deep, all Nature's works,  
Or works of God in heaven, air, earth, or sea,  
And all the riches of this world enjoy'dst,  
And all the rule, one empire; only add  
Deeds to thy knowledge answerable, add faith,  
Add virtue, patience, temperance, add love,  
By name to come called charity, the soul  
Of all the rest: then wilt thou not be loth  
To leave this Paradise, but shalt possess  
A Paradise within thee, happier far (575-87).

Milton anticipates his second great parable here, by having Michael remind Adam of all the temptations that will come to his descendants--including the second Adam--and explaining that the new road to Paradise will be through "deeds answerable" done in love: "the soul of all the rest." This Paradise will not be, during the Christian's lifetime, outward, as the old Eden, but inward, "within you," because within is the abode of the Spirit that makes this possible. The spirit-indwelt Christian is to be a kind of divine beachhead in Satanic territory, the first hint of the New Jerusalem. Michael says that this new Paradise, "happier far," is now within Adam's grasp. Why happier? Because although great was the

state of Innocence Adam had enjoyed, the state of Grace is greater. As God can turn evil to greater good, any fall can be made fortunate. Up to this point *Paradise Lost* is indeed concerned with a fall, but now the beginnings of a recovery can be shown.

Adam's success as a pupil is not demonstrated by his apt recitation of the main points of Michael's lesson but later, in the last five lines of the epic. In the midst of their ejection from Eden (XII.641-9) the human couple are *tempted* to despair, as all their descendents will be tempted. They do weep "some natural tears," but--and this is the effect Milton has spent twelve books preparing us for--"but wiped them soon;" this resisting of the temptation to despair is the obedient moment. If we have followed Milton's "great argument" closely we will understand that wiping away of the tears, and discover that in our understanding of this is Milton's justification of God.

## 2. Eden raised ([Paradise Regained](#))

I who erstwhile the happy garden sung,  
By one man's disobedience lost, now sing  
Recovered Paradise to all mankind,  
By one man's firm obedience fully tried  
Through all temptation, and the Tempter foiled  
In all his wiles, defeated and repulsed,  
And Eden raised in the waste wilderness (PR I:1-7).

The second parable moves on to the life and work of the second Adam, focusing not, as one might expect, on the "act of propitiation" by which Christ is sacrificed on the cross to pay for the sins of the world, but rather on the moment at which Jesus' career begins, the Temptation in the wilderness. Milton's reason for doing this should be clear from the way in which he has ended the first parable. Everything that has happened up to this point prepares us for the appearance, not of a victim, but a victor (Krause 115), and one whose victory can be imitated. The example of obedience on the Cross might have been expected, but it is cluttered up with orthodox insistence on its sacrificial rather than its exemplary character. Milton finds the Temptation more suitable, for it follows upon the first appearance of the Spirit which will in time be sent to *all believers*: "...on him baptized/ Heaven opened, and in likeness of a dove/The Spirit descended... (I.29-31). A voice from Heaven proclaims "the son of Joseph deemed," as instead (or now) the son of God. This incident draws the attention of Satan, who recognizes immediately the opening of a new campaign, though its nature is not clear to him: "Who this is we must learn, for man he seems/In all his lineaments..." (I.91-2).

Led by the Spirit into the wild waste (once, perhaps, Eden?), the anointed Man encounters there his Enemy, who argues that he is not an enemy to mankind but a friend, having

helped them over the years with oracles. The reply, "God hath now sent his living Oracle/  
Into the world, to teach his final will,/And sends his Spirit of Truth henceforth to dwell/In  
pious hearts, an inward oracle..." (I.460-3) shows that the appearance of the Dove is the  
crucial event which is to be put to the test.

In the second book, we see a tie-in with the misguided hopes of "God's Englishmen." The  
disappearance of the long-expected Messiah into the wilderness to reclaim a spiritual Eden  
runs counter to the expectations of the disciples, whose land, overrun with barbarians, they  
had hoped he would immediately liberate:

...God of Israel,  
Send thy Messiah forth, the time is come;  
Behold the kings of the Earth, how they oppress  
The Chosen, to what highth their power unjust  
They have exalted, and behind them cast  
All fear of thee; arise and vindicate  
Thy glory, free thy people from their yoke! (II.42-6)

Not only many of the Puritans, but most of the influential religious radicals active at the  
time of the Revolution anticipated that the overthrow of the unrighteous kings of the  
nations (and the Pope) would result in the reign of the Messiah. Christopher Hill fills  
several books with citations just to demonstrate this one point, quoting from Levellers,  
Ranters, Muggletonians, Fifth Monarchists, assorted Regicides, William Erbery, William  
Sedgwick, Isaac Penington, James Nayler, Edward Burrough, George Fox, John Owen,  
Thomas Goodwin, Oliver Cromwell, James Harrington, Henry Stubbe, and Andrew  
Marvell:

Hence oft I think, if in some happy Hour  
High Grace should meet in one with highest Pow'r,  
And then a seasonable People still  
Should bend to his, as he to Heavens will,  
What we might hope, what wonderful Effect  
From such a wish'd Conjunction might reflect.  
Sure, the mysterious Work, where none withstand,  
Would forthwith finish under such a Hand:  
Fore-shortned Time its useless Course would stay  
And soon precipitate the latest Day.  
("The First Anniversary" 131-140)

Marvell here suggests that Cromwell's virtue joined with that of the people can precipitate  
the end of history by fulfilling the preconditions for the return of the Messiah. Milton at  
the time was caught up in the excitement; he "described the achievements of the English  
Revolution as 'the most heroic and exemplary since the beginning of the world'--not



excluding, apparently, the life and death of Christ" (Hill, *Essays* 115). The Restoration silenced many of the heroic exemplars; others fell into bitterness, satire, and cynicism.

Milton avoids cynicism by turning inward and finding there a revolution that cannot be defeated. He contrasts this with the failed ideology of the Commonwealth by having Satan make all the arguments for political liberation that he had himself so brilliantly made. Indeed, "Satan is not the rhetorical deceiver of *Paradise Lost*, but one half of the poet talking to the other half. His arguments are nearly always rational, and he defends many views which Milton had at one time held" (Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution* 416). Satan mistakes his Man, as had the earlier Milton. Satan offers, quite reasonably, to help attain this political liberation--only to be rebuffed in an unexpected way. Jesus not only seeks no outward office, but analyzes kingship in terms of self-rule:

For therein stands the office of a king,  
His honor, virtue, merit, and chief praise,  
That for the public all this weight he bears.  
Yet he who reigns within himself, and rules  
Passions, desires, and fears, is more a king;  
Which every wise and virtuous man attains:  
And who attains not, ill aspires to rule  
Cities of men, or headstrong multitudes,  
Subject himself to anarchy within,  
Or lawless passions in him which he serves (II.463-72).

This is common political advice, though Machiavelli might point out that it isn't very practical in worldly terms; but now the emphasis shifts:

But to guide nations in the way of truth  
By saving doctrine, and from error lead  
To know, and knowing worship God aright,  
Is yet more kingly...(II.473-6).

Jesus here offers a theory of kingship that is based on spiritual rather than worldly leadership. Satan cannot see the utility of such a theory: "...think'st thou to regain/Thy right by sitting still or thus retiring?" (III.163-4) Carrying the Man to a high mountaintop, he raises the ante--if you don't want to be king, how about emperor? But the prospect of vast armies at his command moves the Man not, for he is no Cromwell; he needs not "...that cumbersome/Luggage of war there shown me, argument/Of human weakness rather than of strength" (III.400-2).

Satan's perplexity increases. But he resiliently takes another tack: "Be famous then/By wisdom; as thy empire must extend,/So let extend thy mind o'er all the world,/In knowledge, all things in it comprehend" (IV.221-4). Showing the Man all the learning of

classical Greece, the foundation of Western intellectual enterprise, Satan paints a picture of "the olive grove of Academe" and offers a full scholarship:

These here revolve, or, as thou lik'st, at home,  
Till time mature thee to a kingdom's weight;  
These rules will render thee a king complete  
Within thyself..." (IV.281-4)

This was the offer Milton himself had not refused, nor most of his critics since (myself included). Academicians find the Messiah's refusal here hard to take, but the logic of it, given the premise of Christian reliance upon the Spirit for guidance, is inexorable:

He who receives  
Light from above, from the Fountain of Light,  
No other doctrine needs, though granted true; (IV.288-90)

Christopher Hill reminds us that "*Paradise Regained's* attitude to learning is really very conventional" (*Milton and the English Revolution* 424). Milton's Jesus here echoes, among others, Bacon, who insisted that learning must be subject to a Christian walk and not go after "curiosities." George Fox, Milton's contemporary, had an "opening from the Lord" "that being bred at Oxford or Cambridge was not enough to fit and qualify men to be ministers of Christ" (*Journal* 7), and Dell and other radicals inquired if the learned could be the elect, and all answered no. Many of the orthodox were agreed with them on this.

Satan reaches the end of his rope, and in a rather plaintive speech, comes without realizing it his closest to understanding the mission of the Man before him:

...I thought thee worth my nearer view  
And narrower scrutiny, that I might learn  
in what degree or meaning thou art called  
The Son of God, which bears no single sense;  
The Son of God I also am, or was,  
And if I was, I am; relation stands;  
All men are sons of God; yet thee I thought  
In some respect far higher so declared (IV.514-21).

*All men are sons of God.* Milton wisely puts the punch line in the Enemy's mouth, even as he hides from him its ironical and radical import. The Devil is thus made to be of Milton's party without knowing it. "There is a certain sense in which we, like the angels, may be called sons of God by virtue of our very nature, in that we were created by him: Luke 3:38: 'sons of Adam, who was the son of God'" (*On Christian Doctrine, Complete Prose Works* VI.495). That Jesus is apparently not "far higher" than other sons of God is the puzzle Satan cannot solve, but which Milton means the reader to solve. In the *Christian*

*Doctrine* Milton examines a doctrine of universal enlightenment: "...God...excludes no man from the way of penitence and eternal salvation..." (194); "...that spiritual illumination which is common to all men" (204); "Moreover this promise was made to all mankind..." (418). He cites Rom. 5:18: "... a benefit upon all men," II Cor. 5:15: "...If one died for all...", Col. 1: "...that he might reconcile all things" (449).

Here Milton, ostensibly a Puritan, diverges widely from Calvinism and Reformed theology in insisting that all, and not merely the elect, have access to this Sonship. Milton's radicalism here places him with some whom the Puritans had counted enemies: Anabaptists, Diggers, and Quakers. Anti- trinitarian, mortalist, and champion of free will, he cites the famous "Quakers' text," John 1:9: "That was the true light which gives light to every man who comes into the world" (455), and discusses the role of Christ and Spirit in saving all. Not that he means all will be saved, for as free will includes the possibility of choosing incorrectly, some will fail to accept the offer. But the offer is made available to all and consists in Jesus's status not as God, someone whose righteousness is unapproachable, but as Man, second Adam, the seed of the Woman (Eve), bruiser of the Serpent's head. The work of redemption, begun in the trial in the wilderness, ends in the acceptance of the indwelling Spirit already placed in the hearts of mankind. All men are sons of God, says Milton, if they will but accept that they already are. It is a question of giving up the will in a prophetic moment, the moment of obedience.

Satan narrowly misses this doctrine, for he does not understand his own remark that all men are sons of God. So he devises one final test for the Man: having found him "Proof against all temptation as a rock.../To the utmost of *mere man* both wise and good" (PR IV:533,5, emphasis added), he places him on the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem. This forces the issue. If the Man falls unrescued from this place, his Sonship is a mere title. If he stands unaided, or if angels come to catch him, he is revealed as something more than merely man. "To whom thus Jesus: 'Also it is written,/'Tempt not the Lord thy God.'" He said, and stood" (IV:560- 1). The obedient moment is here revealed in its full implications. The revelation is that Jesus will not exercise inhuman power, but instead exercise the will to obey the Spirit that is in him. It had not occurred to Satan until this point that the mere presence of the Spirit, which he had seen only in the form of "a perfect dove... whate'er it meant" (I.83), constituted the presence of God, with whom he might not contend. Satan falls, completely routed.

The angels, while ministering to the victorious Second Adam, sing a victory hymn: "...now thou hast avenged/Supplanted Adam, and by vanquishing/ Temptation, hast regained lost Paradise" (IV:606-8). Stanley Fish has called our attention to this hymn's choice of capitalized Temptation rather than Satan as the vanquished: "'Temptation' is not only the word we get; it correctly names our desire for the word we didn't get. That is, it is a temptation to expect something other than (the word) *temptation*, to expect an *external* object of 'vanquishing,'..." (*Composite Orders* 183). Thus ends the second phase of Milton's new revolution. One Man lost Paradise outwardly, and the next Man regained it

inwardly. But these are capitalized Men. Just as Eden was raised in the waste wilderness, it must now be raised in all mankind. But how? For the answer, we must look to *Samson Agonistes*.

### 3. Some Rousing Motions ([Samson Agonistes](#) )

Published together with *Paradise Regained*, and following it in the same volume, Milton's "Dramatic Poem" so differs from it in genre and style as to seem to make it impossible that both pieces can be part of one intention. Yet the contrasts serve an overall purpose. John Shawcross remarks: "If we cannot read *Paradise Regain'd* adequately, we have the more human *Samson Agonistes* to help us" (*Paradise Regain'd* 112). Jesus is unfallen Man, while Samson is fallen man merely. Of all his heroes, Milton's Samson is closest to us in accessibility and sympathy. Though we are meant to imitate Jesus' vanquishing of Temptation, it is perhaps a tall order for the individual human to take on anything so abstract.

From the opening line, Milton warns us that this new work is to focus on the tragically personal: "A little onward lend thy guiding hand/To these dark steps..." (SA 1-2). Samson, like Milton, is blind. Milton, like Samson, has known imprisonment (8) and sought retirement (16), remembers that he had a high calling from God (23) and that the promise of success implicit in this calling goes unfulfilled:

Why was my breeding ordered and prescribed  
As of a person separate to God,  
Designed for great exploits, if I must die  
Betrayed, captived, and both my eyes put out,  
made of my enemies the scorn and gaze...(30-4)

Milton/Samson's tragedy, as we walk in upon it, seems like that of Lear, whose mistake is made almost before we have been properly introduced to him. But Shakespeare shows a development of the action from the error; Milton shows an almost unrelieved landscape of error and almost no development. Shawcross comments: "We are not...shown the road to ruin; the road already has been walked" (*Calm of Mind* 293). We who presume ourselves whole are uncomfortable in the presence of the severely disabled; at first we distance ourselves from the ruined Samson's intense isolation. But then we recognize that his pain is ours, for the outward blindness of the mighty Hebrew is emblematic of our own spiritual blindness. And as his blindness is ours, his foolishness is ours. Our own betrayals, like those of Samson, predate the story at hand; we have experienced, before we come to this poem, enough to make it intelligible. Milton uses our identification both against us and for us. Against us, in the sense which has been demonstrated by Stanley Fish: our habits of thought betray us as we read. Samson faces a series of trials, as does Jesus in the

wilderness. But the temptations offered by Satan to the second Adam are appropriate to the scale of the combatants: all Israel, all knowledge, the world, a minor godship. Samson, in contrast, is faced with no "kingly" enticements. A "private man," his temptations are scaled to the personal. The first of these is an encounter with his old father, Manoa. Manoa wishes to ransom his son from the Philistines: "Well they may by this/Have satisfied their utmost of revenge/By pains and slaveries, worse than death, inflicted/On thee, who now no more canst do them harm" (483-6). The son replies: "Spare that proposal, father, spare the trouble/Of that solicitation; let me here,/As I deserve, pay on my punishment" (487-9). Manoa rightly assumes God will vindicate himself against the god of the Philistines, but wrongly assumes that this will not happen through Samson, whose wreck seems final. Samson assumes that his business at present is to endure punishment for his failings. The idea is that failure somehow disqualifies one for further obedience. Manoa would not go so far: he envisions God giving Samson new sight and new battles: but this is not prophecy; he is indulging in fantasies. Each pre-empts God's right to exercise his divine will through the appearance of a *new* prophetic moment. Each falls to the temptation of self-will. Manoa's arguments, especially because they border on the prophetic, seem reasonable to the reader; as he falls, we fall with him.

The second encounter, with Dalila his wife, Samson finds even less edifying than the first. She has convinced herself she seeks forgiveness; he is convinced she seeks self-justification. Each is, perhaps, partly in the right; certainly each is in the wrong. Samson's interpretation of the visit is that God "sent her to debase me,/And aggravate my folly who committed/To such a viper his most sacred trust/Of secrecy, my safety, and my life" (999-1002). His focus on punishment shows he is still unprepared for the prophetic moment; he is an "unfit reader" of Dalila's treachery and his fall, which makes possible the last great victory now approaching.

The third encounter is with one like himself in size and strength but lacking his courage and resolve. Harapha charges Samson with having used not his own strength but black magic in his famous victories. Stung, Samson recovers, in spite of himself, a measure of his old reliance upon his God:

I know no spells, use no forbidden arts;  
 My trust is in the Living God who gave me  
 At my nativity this strength, diffused  
 No less through all my sinews, joints and bones,  
 Than thine, while I preserved these locks unshorn,  
 The pledge of my unviolated vow.  
 For proof hereof, If Dagon be thy god,  
 Go to his temple, invoke his aid  
 With solemnest devotion, spread before him  
 How highly it concerns his glory now  
 To frustrate and dissolve these magic spell,

Which I to be the power of Israel's God  
 Avow, and challenge Dagon to the test  
 Offering to combat thee, his champion bold,  
 With the upmost of his godhead seconded:  
 Then thou shalt see, or rather to thy sorrow  
 Soon feel, whose God is strongest, thine or mine.  
 (1139-55).

This blind slave still trusts in his Living God, and is still willing, so to speak, to put his money on him. But the offer of combat is in fact a subtle failure to resist temptation; in his haste to bring Harapha to battle, he places his own zeal for God's glory ahead of God's possible plans for him. The prophetic moment eludes all moments of self-will.

Harapha, however, unwittingly sets Samson on the right track by taunting him with his condition: "Presume not on thy God, whate'er he be;/Thee he regards not, owns not, hath cut off/Quite from his people" (1156-9). Samson knows all this and acknowledges it, as he has to the Chorus, Manoa, and Dalila. But he adds that he will not despair of "his final pardon/Whose ear is ever open, and his eye/Gracious to readmit the suppliant" (1171-3). This thought is buried in the heat of his challenge to Harapha, but it will reappear in another form, after the summons to the temple of Dagon.

The problem presented by this summons is a subtle one; if Samson obeys, he obeys the law of the land as a slave owned by Philistines, to whom God has consigned him as a just punishment for his sins. Yet as he is a Hebrew, it is unlawful to him under the law of Moses, to which he still feels himself bound, to be present at pagan rites. Either horn of the dilemma may involve him in an act of self-will.

If I obey them,  
 I do it freely, venturing to displease  
 God for the fear of man, and man prefer,  
 Set God behind; which in his jealousy  
 Shall never, unrepented, find forgiveness (1372-6).

On the other hand, if one need not despair of "his final pardon/Whose ear is ever open," perhaps there is still work to be done on God's behalf and by God's choice as to place, time, and procedure:

Yet that he may dispense with me or thee,  
 Present in temples at idolatrous rites  
 For some important cause, thou need'st not doubt (1377-9).

This is the solution; a Hebrew cannot go to Dagon's rites, but a Hebrew *prophet* can, for the moment will be not Dagon's but God's. Samson is at last ready to act on God's behalf

not on his own initiative but God's: "I begin to feel/Some rousing motions in me which dispose/To something extraordinary my thoughts" (1381-3). And the walls come a-tumbling down.

Critics have argued that *Samson Agonistes* is particularly autobiographical, and this is easy to do; there are, after all, the blindness, the imprisonment, the sense of failure in a great enterprise, of being spurned by an unworthy people still in bondage through their own doing, of having sought to serve God and of seeking to serve God still. The poem speaks of the Philistines as "lords," and one thinks of the lords returning to power with Charles II; it speaks of Dalila's collusion with the Nazarite's enemies, and one is reminded of that moment of poignant bitterness in the *Second Defence of the English People*, when Milton describes himself "at home with his children, while the wife and mother was inside the enemy lines, threatening death and destruction to her husband." But on what parallel there might be, between Milton's last years and Samson's fateful shove against the pillars, there is a resounding silence. What rousing motions did Milton feel, and what temple did he bring down?

At the end of the Preface to his *Milton*, William Blake appends an apocalyptic hymn that ends with an awesome vow:

I will not cease from Mental Fight,  
Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand  
Till we have built Jerusalem  
In England's green and pleasant land.

"Mental Fight," the key phrase here, separates Blake's commission from outward battle with outward weapons, indicating that he is engaged in an inward or *spiritual* struggle which, if it bears fruit, will do so not so much in a secular realm as in a secular realm transformed into a sacred realm by the action of minds and hearts engaged in obedience to a divine imperative. "Sword," here, as it is capitalized, is not the sword of a temporal conqueror such as Cromwell or Fairfax but that mightier Sword, the poet's pen, and also the still mightier Sword of a prophet's word. "We" refers to the English people, performing together a work of building: an image taken from the rebuilding of Jerusalem after the return of the Jews from exile in Babylon; also it is an image of Commonwealth.

"Jerusalem" is the New Jerusalem of Revelation; unlike the Jerusalem of Ezra and Nehemiah the New Jerusalem is an eschatological event, placed usually but not necessarily in the future. In Revelation, the New Jerusalem descends out of the heavens from God; in Blake, the Saints roll up their sleeves and build it themselves. This is in the tradition of England as a typological Eden in disguise, which if all Englishmen might become "God's Englishmen," would be revealed immediately as the new seat of Paradise. But it is now to be conducted as a "Mental Fight," which Blake rightly sees as Milton's paradigm shift from the carnal revolution unsuccessfully carried out by his compatriots. Blake senses that in Milton's later years we have a prophet's design for a different

revolution--not indeed by the sword of military might, for that had always belonged to a mixed multitude, but by the Sword of prophecy, which can be wielded only in the obedient moment.

Andrew Marvell similarly recognizes Milton's claim to the prophetic role--

Where couldst thou Words of such a compass find?  
 Whence furnish such a vast expense of Mind?  
 Just Heav'n Thee, like Tiresias, to requite,  
 Rewards with Prophesie thy loss of Sight.  
 ("On Mr. Milton's Paridise Lost" 40-3)

--but Blake is the "fitter" reader here, for he recognizes that Milton's aim is not so much to be a prophet as to make England, indeed all mankind, a "nation of prophets." The temple of Dagon becomes the secularity of the Restoration, of the Enlightenment, of the Industrial Revolution with its "dark Satanic mills, greedy war with its "waste of wealth and loss of blood" (Sonnet XII), and apostate religion with its priests: "hireling wolves, whose gospel is their maw" (Sonnet XVI). The arm of Samson is the poetic/prophetic voice inspired by that "Spirit, that dost prefer/Before all temples the upright heart and pure" (PL I.17-8).

Milton may seem to have failed in pulling down the pillars of our temple. We jibe at him as did the Philistines, calling his work "a monument to dead ideas," but we do so at a safe distance, like Harapha. And occasionally we wonder if somewhere we may have mistaken our road:

Now that England's historical destiny has whimpered to its end we may perhaps see that the defeated had points to make which would go forgotten in the two-and-a-half centuries of imperial success. We would no doubt define an equal commonwealth differently; but it might seem a more attractive ideal than being the top of nations. In 1644 Milton saw England as 'a nation of prophets'. Where are they now? (Hill, *The Experience of Defeat* 328)

They are not perhaps so far away as we imagine. The obedient moment, says Milton, may be no more than standing still or wiping away a self-indulgent tear. "They also serve who only stand and wait" (Sonnet XIX). Wherever anyone performs an act that cannot fully be explained by self-service, something of Milton's Eden is raised in the waste wilderness, and the *possibility* raised of an Earth (PL XII.464-5) that "Shall all be Paradise, far happier place/Than this of Eden, and far happier days."



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